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The Cuban Invasion, One Year Later

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By PAUL W. BLACKSTOCK, Dept. of International Studies
University of South Carolina

This week of April 15-21 marks the first anniversary of the ill-fated Cuban invasion incident which, even after a year, still remains a subject of bitter bureaucratic and partisan dispute. Writing in the "New York Times" on April 14, 1961, just prior to the landing attempt, James Reston observed: "The last time we intervened in a massive way in Cuba," President McKinley claimed to have the benefit of "divine guidance" (which, it's true, wasn't very good). Teddy Roosevelt thought it would be "good" for the Navy, and Secretary of State Hay thought it was "a wise, if a little war."

JFK's Poll

Ten days before our ill-fated intervention on April 4, 1961, President Kennedy personally polled the members of his National Security Council on the operation at a secret briefing by Mr. Richard M. Bissell, the C.I.A. Deputy who had master-minded the U-2 operation.

All present, except Senator Fulbright, the only Congressman on hand, favored it, and Adm. Berle, the State Department Co-

ordinator for Latin American Affairs, exclaimed: "Let me repeat, explaining that inevitably the U.S. would have to face up to a confrontation with Communism" in this hemisphere "and the sooner the better."

The moment of truth, the landing attempt by about 1,500 Cuban refugees, lasted roughly 72 hours. Some of the 1,200 prisoners taken have only recently, a year later, doubled back after the payment of an exorbitant ransom. President Kennedy accepted "full responsibility" (as did Secretary of Defense McNamara for the joint Chiefs of Staff) and immediately later, that the U.S. was in a sobering episode with "memorable lessons for all."

Thanks to official leaks, such as an article in "The Saturday Evening Post" by Stewart Alsop and another C.I.A.-inspired article by Charles Murphy in "Fortune" magazine, the historical myth has developed that the President and State Department caused "the fatal diamond-shaped hole" of the whole plan, "the doubts of Jack [Richard] Bissell and others . . . and the [uncertainty that] no intervention is possible."

With war so truncated as to guarantee its failure."

Decisions

Like so many other contemporary historical myths, this is largely false. Let us look closely at the crucial decisions. At the April 4th and 5th meetings, the President made it perfectly clear that there should be no direct intervention by U.S. forces — including jet aircraft — on the Carrier "Boxer" standing nearby. Any air strike (such as the one on D-Day-misquattro, which actually destroyed half of Castro's T-33 jet training planes) would have to be under "cover," i.e., by planes with Cuban air force markings.

The cover story was that the two planes which landed in Florida after the air strike were flown by Cuban defectors, the idea being that the refugees could ask "How could we bomb the airfields when we don't have any planes?" This clumsy fiction is reminiscent of the scenes of an illiterate parader charged with distributing propaganda literature in "Don Quixote." You see, how could this be possible when I don't even have a sword?

This cover story was speedily exposed, but only after U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Adlai Stevenson had sworn before the Assembly that the planes were Castro's. After this prelude to the coming debacle, the second air strike was cancelled. But even then, C.I.A. did not call off the landing. The original conception were confident that in case of need, "The impossible military logic" of the situation would force a policy decision from the President and overwhelming jet air power, emanating from the U.S. Carrier "Boxer." It could be brought into play at the crucial moment.

What happened? C.I.A. folk could not believe the Cuban invasion was a "success" of which they could have derived a series of diplomatic advantages coincide with the following: the same reasoning which led to the fact that instead of planning two or three simultaneous landings, it seems to divide Castro's forces (and his remaining supporters) and to render his strategy was adopted.

Seen in this light, what on the surface appears to be an incredible military blunder of which even a school boy would be incapable becomes a perfectly credible mistake in political judgment. An error in assessing the character and determination of the President to stand fast on the original decision — to which all were a party. The same reasoning explains why C. I. A. failed adequately to purge Batista supporters in the landing party (in direct defiance of a Presidential order) and felt that it could dispense with popular uprisings against Castro.

Impossible!

Thus in the first weeks of April 1961, President Kennedy and the State Department attempted to carry out as a covert operation an undertaking which could not possibly have achieved its political objective (the overthrow of Castro and his replacement by a regime permanently acceptable to the Cuban people) even had the landing attempt succeeded.

On the other hand, in spite of a national policy decision to the contrary, C.I.A. and the military advisors concerned continued to implement a military plan the success of which hinged on direct intervention, a plan which even had it succeeded militarily would not have secured the political objective sought after. National objectives cannot be reached by manipulating divided bureaucracies, machines, on different tracks with a breakdown of effective communications between them — especially when neither track leads to the desired objective.